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THE FIELD OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY TODAY

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Seldom has any branch of human learning been called upon to adjust itself to so radically new a situation as has systematic theology within the past few years. Its task used to be defined as the comprehensive systematizing of biblical doctrines.¹ In fact, biblical exegesis was formerly largely controlled by doctrinal considerations. But today biblical scholarship has perfected its methods, and has adopted a point of view which makes the old proof-text machinery seem totally inadequate. The Bible is now treated as a living record of the historical experiences of religious people rather than as a compendium of doctrines. The freshness and virility exhibited in the newer historical expositions has made treatises like those of Shedd or Hodge seem scholastic in method. Popular interest has recently been centered on the results of historical scholarship rather than on any "systematic" presentation of the content of the Bible. It is not too much to say that for the past twenty years the systematic theologian has been engaged in a field of labor against which there has been a general prejudice.

There are, however, signs that this branch of religious thinking is about to enter upon a new epoch. The almost complete disappearance of the older type of theologian from our seminaries has been vividly portrayed by Professor Frank Hugh Foster. After calling attention to the fact that in 1880 the New England Theology was dominant in almost all Congregational, and in many of the Presbyterian seminaries, he adds:

Fifteen years later these teachers had all been replaced, and in no case by a man who could be considered as belonging to the New England school. It had endured more than 150 years; it had become dominant in a great ecclesiastical

¹ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, I, 11: "The only difference between 'biblical' and 'dogmatic' theology is in form. The first examines the Bible part by part, writer by writer. The last examines it as a whole."

denomination; it had founded every Congregational seminary; and as it were, in a night, it perished from off the face of the earth.²

It is true that for a time the disappearance of the old was a more marked feature than the appearance of the new theology. But a glance at the publications since the opening of the century will convince one that there is an encouraging amount of fruitful work in the realm of systematic theology. It is the purpose of this article to indicate briefly some of the aspects of Protestant scholarship in this field. While the causes for theological change are felt in the Catholic church as well as in Protestantism, the modernist movement in Catholicism is concerned more with the vindication of the rights of free scholarship in biblical and historical realms than in the construction of doctrine. We shall, therefore, confine ourselves in our survey to Protestantism, and can, in the space at our disposal, consider only the general aspects of theological systematization.

At the outset, it should be stated that the past few years have seen the publication of a number of vigorous treatises which continue, with some modifications, essentially the traditional method of dogmatics.³ As is indicated by the publishing houses of some of these, conservative ecclesiastical interests are in the forefront. But although the authors believe themselves to be faithful to orthodox ideals, there are some interesting elements showing how the changed situation has made itself felt even in orthodox dogmatics. The older doctrine of biblical infallibility has been almost universally abandoned. There is a distinct tendency to regard the Bible less as a book of theological oracles and more as a practical stimulus to religious life. For example,

² *A History of New England Theology*, p. 543.

³ The following are among the most important of these: Henry C. Sheldon, *System of Christian Doctrine* (Eaton & Mains, 1903); Joseph Agar Beet, *A Manual of Theology* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1906); Milton Valentine, *Christian Theology* (Lutheran Publication Society, 1906); Francis J. Hall, *Introduction to Dogmatic Theology* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1907), the first of a series of ten volumes, intended to set forth orthodox Anglican theology; Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (three volumes) (American Baptist Publication Society, 1907 and 1908); Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Dogmatics: An Exposition of the Principal Doctrines of the Holy Scriptures* (Eaton & Mains, 1907).

A careful critical defense of this ideal is to be found in the inaugural address of Professor C. W. Hodge of Princeton, "The Idea of Dogmatic Theology," *Princeton Theological Review*, January, 1908, p. 52.

Dr. Strong in defining inspiration has substituted for his original declaration that the inspired writings constitute "an infallible and sufficient rule of faith and practice," the statement that they are "sufficient, when taken together and interpreted by the same Spirit who inspired them, to lead every honest inquirer to Christ and to salvation."⁴ It is almost universally recognized that to base one's theology on a doctrine of inspiration which has been shown to be untenable means to weaken the appeal which it will make to thinking men. But it is evident that if any statements in the Bible are erroneous, some standard of truth must be adopted other than the mere presence of a doctrine in the Bible. To give up the theory of biblical infallibility means to take the first step toward a critical rather than a proof-text method in theology.

The necessity of making this radical change of method has been set forth with utmost clearness by Professor W. N. Clarke.⁵ He shows how impossible it is to use the Bible honestly so long as one considers it all of the same degree of authority. It is necessary for *Christian* theology to set forth the view of God and of human life which is in harmony with *Christ's* thought. We should have a Christocentric interpretation of reality rather than a systematization of biblical statements. Such an attempt demands powers of spiritual appreciation as the prime requisite in the theologian. Theology thus becomes not so much a compendium of doctrines as an interpretation of the Christian life and its religious convictions. The resulting freshness and vitality for theology may be admirably seen in Professor Clarke's own textbook⁶ which has for a decade exercised wide influence. President Henry C. King has also called attention to the task of theological reconstruction,⁷ showing that not only the historical interpretation of the Bible, but also the entire modern scientific and philosophical attitude must be reckoned with by the theologian. The new method should include an analysis and justification of religious faith, a historical interpretation of the biblical and Christian

⁴ Cf. edition of 1893, p. 95, with edition of 1907, Vol. I, p. 196.

⁵ *The Use of the Scriptures in Theology* (Scribners, 1905).

⁶ *An Outline of Christian Theology* (Scribners, 1898).

⁷ *Reconstruction in Theology* (Macmillan, 1901; 2d ed., 1904); *Theology and the Social Consciousness* (Macmillan, 1902).

sources of our Christian view of reality, and the recognition of the social character of all thinking, which furnishes a historical, objective control for theology which is vital because each individual is an element in this social whole. A suggestive discussion of the way in which biblical theology may integrate itself into systematic theology from this point of view was given by Professor Ernest D. Burton in a recent number of the *Biblical World*.⁸ He defines systematic theology with reference to the end which it seeks, viz., the statement of normative religious truth with a view to guiding religious life aright. Thus the rights of experience are supreme. The Bible must justify its right to be used as a source of systematic theology by convincing men that it portrays and interprets a type of experience of superlative value. From this point of view, the Bible is not the exclusive source of theology, though it is the most important. And its value for theology rests on the power of its content to awaken religious convictions rather than on any specific theory of inspiration.

The attempt to deal with the Bible as a vital element of religious experience has long been familiar to those who have followed the course of Ritschianism. This school of theology continues to exercise a wide influence. The translations of the third volume of Ritschl's great work into English,⁹ and of his little compendium of Christian doctrine designed for instruction in the German schools,¹⁰ as well as the translation of Lobstein's *Introduction to Protestant Dogmatics*,¹¹ have rendered accessible to those who do not read German some of the influential treatises of this school. The Crown Theological Library has given us a fresh translation of the fourth edition of Herrmann's *Communion with God*,¹² and has put together two addresses of Herrmann in another volume.¹³ The general principles of

⁸ "The Relation of Biblical to Systematic Theology," *Biblical World*, December, 1907, p. 418.

⁹ *Reconciliation and Justification*, translated by Mackintosh and Macaulay (T. & T. Clark, 1900).

¹⁰ Contained in the last part of *The Theology of Albrecht Ritschl*, by Professor A. T. Swing (Longmans, Green & Co., 1901).

¹¹ Translated by Arthur M. Smith, published for the author by the University of Chicago Press, 1902.

¹² *The Communion of the Christian with God* (Putnam, 1906).

¹³ *Faith as Defined by Albrecht Ritschl; and Roman Catholic and Evangelical Morality* (Putnam, 1904).

Ritschlianism are tolerably familiar today. It seeks to rescue theology both from a false legalism, which would present the doctrines of the Bible to us as requirements for our faith, and from a false subjectivism, which would cut loose from all revelation. These two false positions it believes can be avoided by defining the task of theology as the scientific exposition of the Christian faith. But this faith arises because the human spirit recognizes in Christ an authoritative revelation of God to which a willing submission is made. Out of the Christian experience, which rests upon the historical revelation of God in Christ, we derive the religious convictions which are to find a place in theology. Thus the older type of Ritschlianism preserves an analogy to the orthodox ideal, in that it makes a unique revelation the source of theology. But only so much of what is objective as can be voluntarily transformed by the religious spirit into living convictions is to appear in theology.¹⁴ But out of the Ritschlian school in Germany there has developed a younger generation of theologians who find difficulty in making this sharp distinction between the Christian revelation and the course of religious history in general. These younger men are pointing out that Jesus was a historical character, living amid definite historical influences. He cannot be understood, therefore, unless we reproduce the historical situation of which he was a part. When this is done, it is discovered that, however valuable and significant may be the elements of primitive Christianity, these are by no means unparalleled in other religions. Instead of regarding Christianity as a unique revelation, we find it simply one among the religions of human history. It no longer can be said to possess

¹⁴ This ideal continues to be vigorously expounded. Among the most important recent publications are J. Kaftan, *Zur Dogmatik*, a series of articles expounding elements of his previously published *Dogmatik*, which had been criticized; *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 1903, pp. 96, 114, 214, 457, 519; 1904, pp. 148, 273, since published by Mohr in a single volume; Th. Häring, *Der christliche Glaube* (Calwer Verlagsverein, 1906); H. H. Wendt, *System der christlichen Lehre* (Vanderhoeck u. Ruprecht, 1906); Otto Kirn, *Grundriss der evangelischen Dogmatik* (Deichert, 1907); W. Herrmann: "Christlich-protestantische Dogmatik," *Kultur der Gegenwart*, Teil I., Abt. IV., pp. 583-632) (Teubner, 1906); "Die Lage und Aufgabe der evangelischen Dogmatik in der Gegenwart" (three articles in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 1907, pp. 1, 172, and 315).

The influence of Ritschlianism is also distinctly seen in the writings of President King, Professor William Adams Brown, and Principal P. T. Forsyth. In fact, no theologian today can entirely escape that influence.

absolute truth in any historical form. It can merely take a superlative place among the many attempts of man to discover the nature of God. We are to discover the nature of religion, not by exegesis of biblical oracles, or even by consulting evangelical experience as an isolated thing, but by studying religion in its universal historical manifestations. Thus far, this new school has produced no systematic theology. Its constructive work would more properly be called science of religion than systematic theology in any case.¹⁵

The older type of Ritschlianism is still a dominant influence among systematic theologians. But the somewhat technical Christocentric basis has been made more flexible by a group of theologians in America who consult historical and evangelical Christian experience as the actual source of theology.¹⁶ The first trait which strikes

¹⁵ The prominent representatives of this *religionsgeschichtliche* school are Wrede, Weinel, Bousset, Wernle, and Troeltsch. Their chief work is in the realm of history; but they intermingle history with very definite doctrinal suggestions and conclusions. We need only refer to such books as Wernle's *The Beginnings of Christianity* or Bousset's *Jesus* to indicate how a survey of history may be made to yield a very definite theological attitude. Troeltsch is the theologian of the group, but has as yet published no system of doctrine. We may mention the following as giving his point of view: *Die wissenschaftliche Lage und ihre Anforderung an die Theologie* (Mohr, 1900), *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte* (Mohr, 1902); also two contributions to *Die Kultur der Gegenwart* (Teubner, 1906), Teil I., Abteilung IV., entitled, "Protestantisches Christentum und Kirche in der Neuzeit" (pp. 253-458) and "Wesen der Religion und der Religionswissenschaft" (pp. 461-91). Bousset's *What is Religion?* (Putnam, 1907) should also be mentioned as a suggestive indication of the method of approach to theological problems adopted by this "religio-historical" school. Possibly the constructive sketch of a theological system in Sabatier's *Religions of Authority and the Religion of the Spirit* (McClure, Phillips & Co., 1904) would find closest affiliation here, though the influence of Schleiermacher's psychological analysis is quite as evident.

¹⁶ This ideal may be said to have begun in this country with the publication of Professor Lewis F. Stearns's books in the early part of the last decade of the nineteenth century. Among the most significant recent publications are the following: William N. Clarke, *An Outline of Christian Theology* (Scribners, 1898); Olin F. Curtis, *The Christian Faith Personally Given in a System of Doctrine* (Eaton & Mains, 1905); George A. Gordon, *Ultimate Conceptions of Faith* (Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1903); George B. Stevens, *The Christian Doctrine of Salvation* (Scribners, 1905); Clarence A. Beckwith, *The Realities of Christian Theology* (Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1906); William Adams Brown, *Christian Theology in Outline* (Scribners, 1907). In the last three books mentioned we see the very marked development of the use of history as a primary instrument in determining the meaning of traditional doctrines, and in formulating the constructive problems of theology for today.

the reader in treatises of this class is the astonishingly attractive nature of the contents. The formal analyses of the older textbooks have been abandoned. The first problem is to show the relation between religious experience and theological belief. All doctrines are considered in relation to this human experience. The background for the understanding of theology has more and more come to consist in a sympathetic historical interpretation of historical expressions of belief, biblical and ecclesiastical. As a result, one sees how the doctrines of the church were rooted in genuine human experience and how they served to interpret that experience. As historical circumstances of life change, the expression of theology changes; but history remains always an indispensable guide in our religious thinking. From this point of view, doctrines are not imposed upon the believer as divine requirements, but are offered as helps to the solution of actual spiritual problems.

One of the consequences of applying this test of experience is seen in the changed character of the contents of theologies. The older debates about the divine decrees, or about the exact fate of those who die in impenitence, or about the number and function of angels have vanished. Our experience can give us no information on these subjects. Discussion of them, therefore, becomes profitless. No effort is made to have the content of systematic theology coextensive with that of biblical theology. The older theologies, for example, conscientiously elaborated angelology, just because the Bible made assertions about angels. Dr. Strong, in his last edition, devotes twenty-one closely printed pages to the subject. But in most of the books which we are here considering, no reference is made to angels, save in the way of historical exposition. Thus the framework of the traditional theology is dissolving under the new test.¹⁷ It may be expected that treatises on theology will become less and less bound by the older method of arrangement, and will display a greater individuality and variety of literary form as the vitality of the newer point of view comes more and more into prominence.

The theological sensation of the past year has been the "New

¹⁷ One of the most interesting applications of the test of experience to theology is to be found in the last work of the conservative theologian, E. H. Johnson, entitled *Christian Agnosticism* (Griffith & Rowland, 1907).

Theology" movement called out by the publication of R. J. Campbell's book by that name.¹⁸ Mr. Campbell himself was largely influenced by the Hegelianism of T. H. Green; but his point of view found a welcome among many who have come to feel that a study of the realities in the present world of experience can bring us to surer conclusions than can the attempt to penetrate into a supernatural realm different in structure and activity from the world which we know. The God of the New Theology is the immanent Power underlying all that is, rather than the transcendent sovereign who makes his will known by official decrees. Religion from this point of view means the conscious sharing in the life of God on the part of man. Theology means the interpretation of all that exists as the activity of the immanent God. It is evident that there is danger that such theology may favor an aesthetic appreciation of the universe, rather than a recognition of the moral delinquency of man. From the point of view of the older individualism, this danger seems very real. But the doctrine of divine immanence readily transforms itself into a deep concern for the social welfare of man. Hence, what the New Theology loses on the side of individual sin against an individual God, it gains in its increased sensitiveness to social sin. And social sin is the most vivid form of wrong in the consciousness of our day. Hence the New Theology has an enviable opportunity for proclaiming an evangelical message.

In this connection, mention may be made of the suggestive attempts which are being made to interpret the doctrine of God in accord with the idea of immanence.¹⁹ It is interesting to see how many of our

¹⁸ It would be impossible to mention all the articles and books dealing with the movement. The following sufficiently represent the various attitudes toward this modern monistic interpretation of Christianity: R. J. Campbell, *The New Theology* (Macmillan, 1907); J. Warschauer, *The New Evangel* (James Clarke, 1907); W. L. Walker, *What about the New Theology?* (T. & T. Clark, 1907); Charles Gore, *The New Theology and the Old Religion* (Murray, 1907); Frank Ballard, *New Theology; its Meaning and Value* (Kelly, 1907); R. R. Rodgers, *New Theology Problems* (Warne, 1907); Newton H. Marshall, "The Philosophical Method of the New Theology," *Expositor*, July and August, 1907; Anon., "The New Theology," *Church Quarterly Review*, July, 1907; Douglas C. MacIntosh, "The New Theology," *Baptist Review and Expositor*, October, 1907, pp. 600 ff.; W. D. Mackenzie, "The New Theology," *Hartford Seminary Record*, July, 1907, pp. 236 ff.

¹⁹ Among the recent utterances on the subject we may mention the following: Borden P. Bowne, *The Divine Immanence* (Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1905); Herbert

religious thinkers have outgrown the traditional conception of God. A Divine Being who must express himself primarily through a few miracles in the course of history and whose will is to be found in an isolated collection of writings is not big enough to meet the demands of modern faith. The religion of a man who thinks in categories of present-day science demands a God whose presence is more universally accessible. As has been said, this demand for an immanent God is often in danger of lacking moral fiber. Professor McGiffert, however, has shown²⁰ that if the substance-conception of reality (which is characteristic of all immanent theologies which build on Spinoza) be replaced by the dynamic conception of purpose, as demanded by Kant, Lotze, and Ritschl, the conception of immanence may satisfy metaphysical and ethical demands at the same time.

Another characteristic of today is the increasing interest shown in the attempt to state theology in terms of the doctrine of evolution. The works of Drummond, Lyman Abbott, and Griffith-Jones have in years past found wide circles of readers.²¹ Recently three suggestive books dealing with this problem have appeared.²² The book of Dr. Schmid's is significant, because the author has long enjoyed a reputation for orthodoxy. He still thinks, for the most part, in terms of a dualistic world. But he is quite prepared to welcome the evolutionary hypothesis and to show that it by no means necessitates the abandonment of Christian theism. Sir Oliver Lodge, on the other hand, represents the strictly monistic view of modern science. All the doctrines of theology are to be interpretations of the data which we gain by inductive study of the realities of this world. The

A. Youtz, "Three Conceptions of God," *American Journal of Theology*, July, 1907; Henry Jones, "Divine Immanence," *Hibbert Journal*, July, 1907, pp. 744 ff.; A. C. McGiffert, "Divine Immanence and Christian Purpose," *Hibbert Journal*, July, 1907, pp. 768 ff.

²⁰ "Modern Ideas of God," *Harvard Theological Review*, January, 1908.

²¹ Henry Drummond, *Natural Law in the Spiritual World* (1883) and *The Ascent of Man* (Jas. Potts, 1894); Lyman Abbott, *The Theology of an Evolutionist* (Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1897); Griffith-Jones, *The Ascent through Christ* (Gorham, 1901); Newman Smyth, *Through Science to Faith* (Scribners, 1904).

²² Rudolph Schmid, *The Scientific Creed of a Theologian* (A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1906); Oliver Lodge, *The Substance of Faith Allied with Science* (Harper, 1907); W. L. Walker, *Christian Theism and Spiritual Monism* (T. & T. Clark, 1906) (deals with the philosophical rather than the biological doctrine of evolution).

fact that the book was put forth with the purpose of stating a minimum or interdenominational faith, to which the representatives of different schools and sects were to add whatever seemed important, will account for the somewhat cold impression which the book makes. But it is questionable whether man actually in his religious moods thinks of himself primarily as the product of evolution. Is this not the doctrine of a scientific specialist? In starting from this point of view, a theologian is apt to construct a system as formal and external as is the case if one starts with the idea of man as a descendant of Adam.

Another interesting movement in theology has crystallized during the past two or three years. It registers the change of view which conservative theologians have felt to be necessary if theology is to keep in touch with scholarship in other realms. The representatives of this progressive orthodoxy have taken the name "Modern-Positive" to designate their position.²³ As is indicated by the term, the attempt is made to interpret the positive gospel in modern terms. In the place of the spirit of denial or at least of questioning which is attributed to liberal theology the new school would sound a positive note. The gospel is regarded as something objectively provided for the salvation of men. Theology is thus not to be derived by an analysis of religious experience as such. The Christian faith means that a definite objective revelation is to be appropriated by the believer. What is needed is not so much a "new theology" as a *restatement* of the truths of the gospel. Most of the representatives of the school approach more or less closely to the original Ritschlian position, correlating value-judgments and objective fact in such a way as to avoid either pure subjectivism or barren scholasticism. In general, freedom of interpretation is allowed in every realm save where it touches the metaphysical

²³ The important works of this type of thought are: Seeberg, *Grundwahrheiten der christlichen Religion* (published in 1902 by Deichert, as a counter-exposition of Christianity, in view of Harnack's lectures on *Das Wesen des Christentums*, 4th ed., 1906); an English translation is about to be published by Williams & Norgate; Theodor Kaftan, *Moderne Theologie des alten Glaubens* (J. Bergas Verlag, 1906); R. H. Grützmacher, *Studien zur systematischen Theologie* (Deichert, 1905); *Modern-positive Vorträge* (Deichert, 1906); Karl Beth, *Die Moderne und die Prinzipien der Theologie* (Trowitzsch, 1907); E. Schaefer, *Die Christologie der Bekenntnisse und die moderne Theologie* (Bertelsmann, Gütersloh, 1905); Fr. Kropatscheck, *Die Aufgaben der Christusgläubige Theologie in der Gegenwart* (Runge, 1905); P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1907).

deity of Christ or the ontological significance of the death of Christ. Even here there is division of opinion as to whether the virgin birth must be affirmed in order to save a proper Christology. A somewhat original position, which is nevertheless in general harmony with the modern-positive school, has been hinted at by Professor Shailer Mathews.²⁴ He believes that by the use of strictly historical method one can distinguish between the facts of the New Testament religious experience and the interpretation of those facts in the first-century current theological, political, and philosophical categories. After discovering the objective facts in this historically scientific way, we are ready to reinterpret these facts in language suited to our day. Theology thus will be on an objective basis, and will escape the reproach of subjectivism to which it is subject when it builds purely on religious experience. At present this modern-positive school is being severely criticized both by the traditionalists who feel that too much has been surrendered, and by the liberals who feel that the retention of the authority of certain unverifiable elements of past history is incompatible with the genuine scientific promotion of theology. The movement, however, is significant of the changed theological attitude of conservative scholars.

The above brief sketch of some of the main movements in the field of systematic theology makes it evident that scholars in this field are rapidly abandoning that ideal of dogmatic systematization which was inherited from scholasticism and which is so ill adapted to correlate itself with the scientific methods which are now universally accepted in other fields. Less and less does the theologian think of his task as the defense of a system. More and more is he assuming the inquiring attitude which leads to a sympathetic appreciation of the work of the scientific spirit in other realms. It is not too much to say that the beginning of the twentieth century has seen the definite attempt on the part of systematic theologians to approach their task with a spirit and method which should lead to a genuine respect for theology in the scientific world, and which should be increasingly fruitful in helping to a sane expression of religious convictions in this perplexing period of intellectual and spiritual readjustment.

²⁴ *The Messianic Hope in the New Testament* (University of Chicago Press, 1905), pp. 317 ff.; *The Church and the Changing Order* (Macmillan, 1907), chap. ii.